DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 388 801 CE 070 190

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TITLE Career Development in Generation X. Myths and Realities.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Columbus, Ohio.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 95
CONTRACT RR93002001
NOTE 4p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Career Development; Career Education; Employer Employee Relationship; *Employment Patterns; Labor Force Development; *Work Attitudes; *Work Ethic; *Young Adults
IDENTIFIERS *Generation X

ABSTRACT

Several myths relate to the question of whether Generation X, the population cohort following the Baby Boomers, has different values, work ethics, and attitudes toward work and career development. The first myth is that individuals in Generation X are slackers, lacking career drive and ambition. The reality is that Generation X may just view the concept of career differently. They use job hopping as a way to build their skills and make themselves more marketable. They are more self-sufficient and outcome based. Given their priorities of money, power, and status, many are becoming entrepreneurs. The second myth is that individuals in Generation X are poorly suited to today's career realities. The reality is that individuals in Generation X have higher levels of education than those in previous generations. The real assets they bring to the workplace are their knowledge of technology and ability to concentrate on a number of tasks at one time. They are also accepting of change. A third myth is that individuals in Generation X have little influence in the workplace. The reality is that the type of training companies do is being shaped by the learning style of this generation. Generation X is also shaping company leadership, since they require more coaching and feedback from supervisors than previous generations. They expect their opinions to count. Of the greatest significance may be the workplace changes influenced by the cultural diversity of this generation. (Contains 12 references.) (YLB)

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ED 388 801

Career Development in Generation X
Myths and Realities

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Myths and **REALITIES**

by Bettina A. Lankard 1995

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CAREER DEVELOPMENT IN GENERATION X

Generation X refers to the population cohort following the Baby Boomers. Sources differ as to the exact years during which this cohort was born. Coupland (1991) suggests 1960 to 1970; Bradford and Raines (1992) propose 1965 to 1975; and Howe and Strauss (1993) suggest 1961 to 1981. Whatever the birth years, it is their common life experiences that give this cohort an identity. Individuals born in Generation X are reputedly more global, technologically oriented, and culturally diverse than the generations before them. Coming of age when the linear career path no longer exists, where average income is falling, and where continuous change is the norm, does this generation have different values, work ethics, and attitudes toward work and career development? As the myths and realities of this question are explored, it is important to remember that the characteristics, habits, and traits attributed to individuals in this cohort are mere generalizations, presented to afford a better understanding of the generation called Generation X.

Myth: Individuals in Generation X Are Slackers, Lacking Career Drive and Ambition

Various books, articles, and surveys have described individuals in Generation X as slackers, cynical about the future and resentful of Baby Boomers who have "taken all the good jobs" (Kruger 1994). This description is based on observations that Generation X workers jump from job to job, are unwilling to conform to organizational demands that do not suit them, and leave jobs that bore them and are not "fun" (Wyld 1994). Although persons in the two generations before Generation X—the Silent generation (1925-1945) and Boom generation (1946-1964)—interpret these behaviors as indicative of low career drive and ambition (Bradford and Raines 1992), it may be that Generation X just views the concept of career differently than did those before them.

The twenty somethings of Generation X who are currently in the work force entered the labor market with no expectations. Many of them believe the best years (in terms of society) are behind them (Howe and Strauss 1993). They have been told that they are the "only generation since the Civil War to come of age unlikely to match their parents' economic fortunes" (ibid., p. 7). They place little faith in job security. "They saw their parents laid off without cause and their perceptions of the working world were shaped in time of economic turmoil. Consequently, they tend to see every job they take as temporary and every company as a stepping stone to something better, or at least to something else" (Filipczak 1994, p. 23). Since they have adopted the philosophy that there are "no guarantees," they are not interested in working their way up. They want to be valued immediately for their skills (Bradford and Raines 1992). They see their career strength in their ability to solve problems and do jobs that others are not able to do. "They believe that security nowadays comes from the transferability of one's skills to other jobs rather than from advancement in hierarchically managed organizations" (Wilkinson 1995, p. 67). They use job hopping as a way to build their skills and make themselves more marketable (Filipczak 1994, p. 27).

Although individuals in Generation X may be cynical, they do not lack drive. They are very self-oriented—they want to know what's in it for them. They are also more self-sufficient and outcome based. They want to "get in, do the work, and move on to the next thing" (Filipczak 1994, p. 27). "They want to be judged not on input but output, no longer on the site where work is done, but on how well work is done" (Wilkinson 1995, p. 67).

Money is an important motivator to this generation. In fact, many studies show it is the top priority (Filipczak 1994). This is not surprising since many of the X-ers are used to spending money and have cultivated expensive tastes. As teens, they earned money that they were allowed to spend on whatever they wanted—clothes, cars, stereos, compact discs, and entertainment. This enabled them to "buy a level of affluence that still reflects massive parental subsidy" (Howe and Strauss 1993, p. 104). However, harsh reality hits when X-ers leave home or school. Today's economy offers fewer jobs to these job seekers and lower salaries. "Strauss cites statistics that show a decline in average income for people under the age of 30 in every demographic category except single women with college degrees" (Filipczak 1993, p. 23). Overall, there are fewer and fewer good-paying, entry-level jobs, even for college graduates. "From 1989 to 1992, for example, anticipated hiring of first year college grads by medium size and large U.S. companies was off a full 35%" (Fenner 1994, p. 90). Even now, despite the improving economy, the class of 1994 can expect only a 1% improvement (ibid.).

Given their priorities of money, power, and status (Howe and Strauss 1993), many of the Generation X-ers are becoming entrepreneurs, starting companies at a faster rate than other generations. "A study by Marquette University and the University of Michigan conducted in 1993 found that entrepreneurs between the ages of 25 and 34 created 70 percent of all new business startups" (Cohen and Simons, p. 54). In their book, the *13th Generation: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?*, Howe and Strauss (1993) speak optimistically about a future that is possible for individuals in the 13th generation. They predict that "the most successful 13-ers will be risk takers, who exploit opportunities overlooked by established businesses" (p. 219). They predict the "leading 13-er frontier will be overseas, where this generation can most fully apply its entrepreneurial instincts and take advantage of its linguistic, computer, and marketing skills" (ibid.).

Myth: Individuals in Generation X Are Poorly Suited to Today's Career Realities

For those who are and remain unskilled and uneducated, the future is grim. Even those with a high school education are at risk. According to "Generation X-onomics" (1994), "college grads earn an average of 77% more than high school grads, and the gap is increasingly widening" (p. A27).

Fortunately, individuals in Generation X have higher levels of education than those in previous generations. "In 1993, 47% of the 18-24 year olds had at least some higher education compared with around 31% in 1980" (Quinn 1994, p. 94).

Also, their high school dropout rates are down. Generation X women who are in their twenties, likely to have been raised by working mothers, are better educated than the women in any other generation in U.S. history (Kruger 1994).

The real asset individuals in Generation X bring to the workplace is their knowledge of technology and their ability to concentrate on a number of tasks at one time. This is especially significant in this "age of computers." Filipczak (1994) notes that "X-ers are either adept users or at least unafraid to try new technology. Combine this absence of fear with the ability to parallel think and process information quickly, and you've got workers who can pick up almost any software program and learn it quickly" (p. 26).

X-ers are also accepting of, if not comfortable with, change. Their youth was fraught with change and uncertainty. They have seen job prospects go from excellent to bleak; they have seen their parents lose or have altered jobs due to company downsizing and restructuring; they have seen national leaders discredited; and "40 percent of them were raised by divorced or separated parents" (Kruger 1994, p. 62). "In many ways they (X-ers) are more emotionally suited for today's career realities than their elders" (Lancaster 1995, p. B1).

Quality of life is a major consideration of individuals in Generation X as they face workplace and career demands. This generation is concerned about having a balanced life. They are not workaholics and believe in compartmentalizing their work, social, and family lives. Their outside interests are as important to them as their jobs. Having been deprived of their parents when they were children, they are committed to spending time with their own children. Their family values are more like those evident in the 1950s, and it is predicted that the divorce rates of this generation will show a downward plunge. They are more realistic about the balance between their work and family/social lives that will give them satisfaction and make them happy.

The women in Generation X are especially cognizant of career realities. Many of them are ruling out jobs in management consulting and corporate finance, the jobs women in the Baby Boom generation coveted. They are unwilling to work the 9 a.m. to 2 a.m., 17-hour day of their predecessors (Kruger 1994). Many of those who have or hope to have children want to work part-time so they can be with them during their preschool years.

Myth: Individuals in Generation X Have Little Influence in the Workplace

Representing a shrinking labor pool in an economy that demands high numbers of workers, individuals in Generation X hold the trump cards, the ace of which is education and training. To avoid the high cost of job turnovers, companies are offering education and training as incentives for workers to remain in their jobs. On-site skill training and college courses offered to workers reap rewards for both the company and its workers and are especially attractive to the "knowledge seeking" Generation X-ers. For those workers who have limited skills and the least amount of education and experience, continual skill upgrading is essential to their work future and to the company's high performance goals. Many companies are supporting school-to-work transition programs that offer apprentice-like training to high school students as a way to ensure skilled entry-level workers.

The type of training companies do is being shaped by the short attention span of this MTV generation. "Corporate-produced videos never run more than 15 minutes, and accordingly, there can't be too many visuals in the training" (Filipczak 1994, p. 24). The practical application of basic skills and job skills are preferred over instruction in theory; hands-on activity over lecture. Generation X is also shaping company leadership. Generation X-ers require more coaching and feedback from their supervisors than previous generations. They want clear communication. They want to know what is expected of them and what benefits they will get in return. They want to know how policy is set and how decisions are made. Having been educated in the total quality management process, Generation X workers expect their opinions to count and to know that they can make a difference. Most certainly they expect to participate in the decision making and in processes that influence their lives (Bradford and Raines 1992).

Managers of Generation X-ers are advised to assume a mentor role, listening to the X-ers day by day and communicating to them the organization's vision, linking it to their lives (Bradford and Raines 1992). Because many Generation X-ers missed close communication with their parents, they want more guidance and advice from their superiors. They want their company's support as they balance their work and home/social lives. The women want to know what options the company is making available to working mothers and are demanding child care, sometimes in lieu of a pension plan.

Of the greatest significance may be the workplace changes influenced by the cultural diversity of this generation. Howe and Strauss (1993) predict that the "13th" generation will become "one of the most important immigrant generations in U.S. history" (p. 218). They state that "foreign-born high-achievers will catapult new ethnic groups, especially Asians and Hispanics, into national prominence—much as the Lost Generation did for the Italians and Eastern Europeans and the Gilded Generation did for the Irish and Germans" (ibid., pp. 218-219). Their ethnic, cultural, and racial diversity will influence politics, government, and the marketplace as well. The exact influence of these factors on the workplace of the future, however, will not be known for years to come.

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